

The aesthetics of political resistance: On silent politics

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Abstract

This article analyses the aesthetics of silent political resistance by focusing on refugees' silent political action. The starting point for the analysis is Jacques Rancière's philosophy and his theorisation of the aesthetics of politics. The article enquires into the aesthetic meaning of silent refugee activism and interprets how refugees' silent acts of resistance can constitute aesthetically effective resistance to what can be called the 'speech system' of statist, representative democracy. The article analyses silence as a political tactic and interprets the emancipatory meaning of silent politics for refugees. It argues that refugees' silent acts of political resistance can powerfully affect aesthetic, political subversion in prevailing legal-political contexts.

Keywords

aesthetics, political resistance, Rancière, refugees, silence

Refugees and silent political action

When politically marginalised refugees set out to resist their unequal position in a particular political context, they often organise their protests in a loud, vocal manner. By expressing their resistance through loud outcries of dissent, refugees attempt to make their political claims for equality heard as clearly and as widely as possible. These kinds of protests can sometimes be effective in gaining public attention. Occasionally, however, refugees organise protests without recourse to loud vocality. Sometimes egalitarian refugee protests emerge in a mode that can be characterised as *silent action*. In silent political action, refugees express their resistance in a non-verbal, embodied way. Refugee activists' bodies communicate politically in silent acts of resistance. Silent politics often emerges in restricted, prisonlike conditions, such as detention centres

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where the persons confined within these places do not have access to public spaces where they could organise loud, vocal protests. Sometimes, however, refugees who succeed in entering a public space enact their protest in the silent mode.

One such silent protest took place in Finland in the early autumn of 2017. At that time, a few years after the general panic following the declaration of a refugee 'crisis' in Europe, two young asylum seekers climbed to the steps of the Finnish Parliament House and, without verbal expression, silently stabbed themselves. The refugees survived the act and later elaborated their story to the national press. They were a same-sex couple who had fled from Russia in fear of persecution on account of their sexual orientation. Their asylum applications had been denied earlier that year and, through their act, they wanted to protest the Finnish refugee system. The refugees¹ declared that they would rather die than be forced to return to a place where they could not freely express their sexuality.

The refugees' protest evokes many pressing political questions calling for theoretical analysis. One key question the protest evokes is to what extent the human right to sexuality is in practice recognised as a ground for asylum and protected in contemporary political contexts (see, for example, Spijkerboer, 2013).² In this article, however, I will not focus on the question of the right to sexuality as such, but specifically on the mode of the political action through which the refugees resisted their denial of this right. In the article, I focus especially on the silent character of the refugees' protest.

The central problem the article attempts to address is the marginalisation of refugees from political speech in contemporary liberal, statist political contexts. Refugees often cannot participate in verbal political speech in a way that their speech would be recognised as politically meaningful in these contexts (see Arendt, 1951). In frameworks where verbal political speech has been mainly privatised to citizen subjects, often the only possibility for refugees to communicate politically is through acts of resistance. Such acts can convey the political messages that would otherwise remain unheard and unrecognised in statist settings. One mode in which refugees' acts of resistance can then emerge is silent resistance. In silent resistance, *silence speaks* or enables the body to speak in visually strong ways.

In the article, by applying radical democratic theory as well as somewhat phenomenological insights, I analyse how silent resistance can be a politically emancipatory mode of politics for refugees as well as, more generally, a politically subversive mode of political action in prevailing 'Western', liberal, statist political contexts of representative democracy. I interpret how silent refugee protests, such as the two refugees' protest in Finland, can disrupt the prevailing logic and 'sense' of politics and instead introduce an alternative sensibility on politics and common life. The subversive effect that silent resistance can have, I argue, can be understood as an *aesthetic* effect. I analyse silent resistance from this aesthetic perspective. By focusing on the aesthetic, politically subversive potential in silent refugee activism, my attempt is to introduce a new perspective for theoretical discussions on refugee politics.

The article takes as a starting point Jacques Rancière's theorisation of the aesthetics of politics (see, for example, Rancière, 2004, 2010a). Rancière's theory opens novel insights into the politically subversive effects that politically marginalised people's acts of resistance can have on what can be called the aesthetic constitutions of political

orders. We can first outline some basic ideas in Rancière's theory because the arguments developed later in the article can be understood to be rooted in these.

First, we must understand the meaning of the 'aesthetic' in politics. Following Rancière, the aesthetic in the political context does not mean the aesthetic judgment of beauty or art but instead refers to certain kind of *sense making*. The aesthetic points to emotional and cognitive sensibility and to the imaginative sphere. An aesthetic sense of politics can mean, on the one hand, people's basic sensed experience of everyday politics: politics as the mundane processes of representative decision-making for instance. On the other hand, the aesthetics of politics can refer to the aesthetically subversive effect of acts of political resistance. This aesthetic effect lies in these acts' ways of disturbing the conventional ways of experiencing the political world.

One central idea in Rancière's theory is something he calls the *distribution of the sensible*. Acts of political resistance can challenge the prevailing distribution of the sensible. The distribution of the sensible is a kind of mostly implicit aesthetic 'law' that defines the basic modes of perception in which the forms of political partaking are inscribed in a particular framework (Rancière, 2010b: 36). All political systems are based on a distribution of the sensible. The essence of any political configuration is to exist as a 'system of self-evident facts of sense perception' (Rancière, 2004: 7). Sensibility here refers both to intellectual sense making and to emotional, intuitive feel and bodily sensations. Any social or political 'part' a person holds in a society has its general sensibility to others and to the person herself. The identity and political position of a refugee, for example, result from certain contingent aesthetic organisation of the sense of political identities.

Refugees' acts of political resistance can disturb the prevailing aesthetic organisation of politics. From a Rancièrian perspective, such acts appear as *radical democratic* acts. In contrast to the conventional liberal understanding of democracy as a system of government, Rancière conceives democracy as the process of enacting egalitarian political resistance (see Rancière, 1999, 2007, 2010a). Democracy takes place when there emerge political performers who are not part of society or agents of the state apparatus (Rancière, 1999: 100). The subject of democracy may not be, for example, the affirmed citizen of a national community; instead, a politically marginalised refugee can be one emblematic enactor of democracy. Democracy is actualised in acts of collective resistance where people, such as refugees, without a pre-recognised capacity for political action, become political actors (see Rancière, 1999, 2010c).

In Rancière's theory, '*the people*' as the subject of democratic politics appears as a 'supplementary part in relation to every count of the parts of the population'. It is *the part with no part* in a social and political whole of counted parts and positions (Rancière, 2010b: 33). When the people of democracy emerge on the political stage, their attempt is to suspend the present 'logics of legitimate domination' by disjoining 'the population from itself' (2010b: 33). Democratic politics shifts *the police* view of society, consisting of determinate 'groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places' (2010b: 36). Following Rancière's theorisation, we can say that refugees' acts of political resistance disturb the aesthetic arrangement determining refugees' depoliticised position in the political order by supplementing it with their political part.

Through democratic politics, refugees can dissent to the basic aesthetic constitution of statist political orders that marginalise them from politics.

Refugee organised radical democratic action is an example of a form of political activism shifting the coordinates of liberal, statist, representative democracy. In this article, I analyse especially how refugees' silent acts of resistance can shift the prevailing coordinates of politics. Throughout the article, I use the two refugees' protest in Finland as an exemplary case of aesthetically and politically subversive silent, radical democratic action.

I start by analysing how the two refugees' silent act of resistance revealed and politically challenged the aesthetic order of political speech in the statist, representative context where it took place. I then focus more closely on some specific aesthetic features of the refugees' political act. I especially reflect on the embodied, communicative character of their silent act of self-harm and interpret its performative, theatrical and political storytelling functions.

Resisting the 'speech system' of politics

When the two refugees stabbed themselves on the steps of the Finnish Parliament House, through their act they, on the one hand, attempted to reveal to the public the harm caused by the Finnish refugee system in its decision to deny them the right to asylum. On the other hand, we can argue that the refugees' act also had a revelatory function toward the harm resulting from something that can be called the basic 'speech system' of politics prevailing in the refugee system's background. The act made visible harmfulness inscribed into the aesthetic order of political speech in the Finnish context. It specifically revealed refugees' harmful, *politically silenced* position in this order. We can argue that the refugees' silence and refrain from vocality in carrying out their act intensified this revelatory effect. The silent act enabled the message the refugees were at least implicitly conveying of their silenced position to come across in a clear and effective way. The refugees' silence gave a kind of dramatic effect to their act of self-harm, while simultaneously directly showing their position of forced silence as bearers of the refugee identity in the statist, aesthetic speech system's framework.

The refugees' protest evokes the question on the aesthetic meaning of political identity in contemporary liberal, statist contexts. We can say the protest displayed the oppressive distribution of the sense of political identities in these frameworks. The political speech systems in liberal, statist political contexts can be described as based on certain routinised identity determination processes. They are based on determinate ways of calculating and on set patterns for determining the identity characteristics required from legitimate political speakers (see, for example, Ranci re, 1999). If we enquire into the politically oppressive effects of these systems of speech, the refugee appears as a critical figure. The refugee is the paradoxical identity of the simultaneously political and unpolitical person. On the one hand, refugees are depoliticised by being claimed as unpolitical others. Refugees appear as objects of state politics and are in principle not included in a nationalised political community as political actors with equal political rights as citizen subjects. On the other hand, refugees are at times viewed as political threats, and the aim is to disarm them of all political agency (see, for example, Nyers,

2013).³ In liberal, statist contexts, refugees' political action can sometimes appear as something radically 'other' to dominant aesthetic sensibility and political logic.

Through public protests, refugees can attempt to alter the prevailing aesthetic sense of the refugee identity (see, for example, Squire, 2010). Refugees can contest the institutionalised, legally coded and in society practically realised sense of what it politically means to be a refugee. Through their protest in Finland, the two refugees, for example, disturbed the dominant aesthetic sensibility on refugees' position in the political order. We can argue that, on the one hand, the refugees resisted being at the mercy of the statist decision on their identity in the first place. They dissented to the initial definition that the state had made of their political position, as it had determined them deportable and had thus counted them out of the Finnish political community. On the other hand, by silently 'speaking' through their act, the refugees resisted being marginalised from political speech because of their refugee identity. By communicating politically without a pre-recognised right to political speech, the refugees politicised and redefined the political position of the refugee.⁴

In general, in liberal, statist frameworks, there are many logics of oppression in action that appear problematic for persons inscribed with the refugee identity. We can critically address some of them by looking more closely at the two refugees' protest in Finland. We can argue that the protest displayed some basic oppressive features in dominant aesthetic systems of politics based on citizen-centred, representative democracy as well as on the privilege of certain aggressive, verbal modes of political speech.

We can start with the question of representative democracy and ask what its oppressive features are for refugees. One basic problem of representative democracy is that it is based on a citizen-centred calculation. Citizens appear as the primary representative speakers in statist representative democracy, while non-citizen refugees remain in certain silent positions in this speech order. The representative system, however, can appear as a problematic system of speech for many citizens as well. This is because there are only a limited number of positions available for representative political speakers in the system. One central problem of representative democracy is the way in which the positions of speech and silence have been determined in its framework. This system of democracy has, to a certain extent, authoritatively predetermined the positions and the identities required for legitimate political speech as well as positioned their background of 'the represented', silent observers (see Lievens, 2014). Furthermore, an implicit expectation in this order of speech is that the pre-set speech positions will be obtained by persons who are sufficiently skilled in what we might call 'extrovert speech'⁵ to speak on behalf of the people in the silent positions. Overall, in the representative order, certain speech modes and certain kinds of speakers are generally sensed as more legitimate than others. The refugee is seldom anticipated to be a political speaker in the representative context. In addition, silent speech is not generally expected to be a politically meaningful form of communication.

In the representative system, political communication is commonly reduced to a game of loud persuasion where often the quickest and loudest speech is the one that wins recognition. Even to run for office and to be selected as a representative, one must be fluent in certain loud self-advertising. Talent in self-commercialisation and loud persuasion, as well as the possible yearning for power driving one's efforts at becoming a

representative, however, have little to do with one's talent in political decision-making.⁶ Institutional settings of speech are often constituted on the premise of individuals having a strategic outlook on speech. In modern political contexts, even everyday communication can end up expressing a strategic outlook, and basic human care and kindness become perverted into strategic tools for gathering and preserving 'social capital'. Refugees and other politically marginalised people can find it difficult to participate in these strategically coordinated settings, as they often have not had socialising success in building networks that they could utilise in getting recognition for their speech. When representative democracy is reduced to a democracy of the 'socially most successful', it becomes a hierarchical and exclusionary system (see Rancière, 1999). Overall, this representative system of speech is based on the necessity of most people staying silent in its setting to enable the emergence of the pre-selected, representative speakers' vocalisation. The *sound* of representative democracy can indeed be described as the incessant chatter of some against the muteness of others.

How can the aesthetic reality of speech in the representative system then be resisted? We can argue that the political use of silence can in fact be useful here. In political activist use, silence can succeed in powerfully conveying political messages of resistance that interrupt the smooth working of the representative system. When a silent political act consists of an active, observable gesture of resistance, it can interrupt the loudly constituted backdrop of representative speech. We can argue, for example, that the two refugees' silent, visually strong, political act of stabbing themselves on the steps of the Finnish Parliament House interrupted the Finnish representative speech system for a while. It interrupted the conventional political speakers in this system. The refugees' act defied the aesthetic order of political speech, where only determined kinds of people are anticipated to be political speakers, while individuals inscribed with certain differing identity characteristics are systematically rejected as unqualified to participate in political discourse. In the face of being determined as politically voiceless asylum seekers, the refugees actualised their political capacity and took the position of political actors.

While the refugees' protest, on the one hand, contested the privatisation of political speech in the representative mode, it also importantly challenged the *citizen-centred* mode of politics. Refugee activism in general undermines the idealisation of the citizen as the primary political subject legitimately qualified for political action. Refugee protests can diminish the strictness of the political citizen and unpolitical refugee divide. This is one basic argument in critical citizenship studies (see, for example, McNevin, 2011; Nyers and Rygiel, 2012). However, citizenship can also be understood in an alternative way from the start. It can be conceived as a form of political action that is not limited to the practice of citizens. The refugees' act of protest in Finland, for example, can be described as an *act of citizenship* or a *contestation of citizenship* (see Engin and Nielsen, 2008; McNevin, 2011; Nyers and Rygiel, 2012; Somers, 2008). In their protest, the two refugees took the position of the political citizen and seized it from any ethnonationalist or other statist appropriation.

Still, an alternative approach to analysing the refugees' protest would be to interpret it as an instance of *non-status politics*. The use of the non-status category as an alternative to acts of citizenship, for example, would allow us to further distance from the

citizenship concept that evokes statist associations. Using this category would seem appropriate also because, in their protest, the two refugees appeared indeed to be moving at a distance from statist identity categories. The refugees did not verbally define their identity when they enacted their protest, but instead appeared in the nameless, category-less state of the silent human body. The non-status form of politics can generally be an emancipatory mode of politics for people marginalised in the context of statist speech systems. One example of emancipation-oriented non-status politics in recent years is that of protests by the *sans papiers* (see Nail, 2015). The *sans papiers* have refused the 'illegal' migrant label inscribed on them and instead express in their name their unequal social and political position resulting from their lack of certain statist identity papers (Krause, 2008; Nail, 2015; see Beltran, 2009).

In their protest in Finland, the two refugees also aesthetically expressed a kind of *refusal*. We can interpret their protest as a symbolic act of refusing the deportable asylum seeker label attached to them. By silently wounding their bodies that had been inscribed with an identity that they did not want to determine their fate and life circumstances, the refugees in an embodied way refused this identity. In their protest, the refugees displayed their *equality* as vulnerable⁷ human beings.

Overall, the refugees' protest evoked the question of equality in a powerful way. The protest was an expression of *active equality* (May, 2008, 2010). We can say that the protest arose from an assumption of equality and that, through their political action, the refugees verified the reality of equality in practice. This interpretation is very much in line with how Rancière understands the meaning of political equality (see, for example, Rancière, 2010c). If we follow the Rancièrian conception, we can say that the refugees built a political case where they affirmed the existence of equality in practice (see Rancière, 2010c). Even if only for a fleeting moment, they enacted active equality into being.

The refugees did not only display the equality of the vulnerable human body in their protest, but also, and for us especially interestingly, affirmed the existence of an equal human capacity for political speech. Following Rancière still, we can argue that the refugees affirmed an equality of speaking beings. This equality is something inscribed into the basic logic of prevailing speech systems and, in fact, the very functioning of the oppressive hierarchies in these systems testifies to the existence of this equality. As Rancière argues: 'the inequality of social ranks works only because of the very equality of speaking beings' (1999: 49). In a hierarchical speech system, 'the inferior has understood the superior's order because the inferior takes part in the same community of speaking beings' (1999: 49). Human beings share certain equal capacity for communicative speech and common understanding.⁸ We can argue that the refugees' protest in Finland expressed particularly an equality of *communicative beings*. The refugees assumed the existence of an equality of communicative beings and, in their silently communicative protest, moved on to a level of basic common human understanding. They anticipated that their silently made claim would be understood.

The refugees' egalitarian protest showed a certain power they possessed. The protest expressed a power that we might call politically marginalised people's democratic power. Democratic power can be understood as the power that emerges in acts of political resistance enacted by people who have no other ways of attaining power in

prevailing aesthetically organised political orders. It is the power of those who do not have any of the conventional privileged entitlements required for exercising political power, such as wealth, title, knowledge, or experience (Rancière, 1999, 2006, 2010a). Power here appears neither as the power over the autonomy of another person⁹ nor as the power that only materialises in the concerted action of pre-recognised, politically equal agents.¹⁰ Power is instead politically marginalised people's power to politically resist their unequal, marginalised position in a particular political context. This is a radically egalitarian conception of power and an aesthetic alternative to many conventional theories on power.

The two refugees' protest in Finland can be interpreted as an instance of the materialisation of this kind of egalitarian, radical democratic power. What is especially interesting for us is the fact that the refugees actualised this power through *silent* action. To understand that political power can be actualised through silence necessitates a critical view on conventional tendencies to link primarily speech with power and silence with powerlessness. I will next move on to analysing in more detail some specific aesthetic features of refugees' politically powerful silent political action. I reflect especially on the performative and theatrical features of such action as well as interpret the political storytelling function of silent refugee politics.

Performing resistant silences

Critical refugee research has traditionally focused on analysing the oppressiveness of silence for refugees. The studies in this field address the various silencing practices targeting refugees and forcing them into unchosen silence in modern societies. In many important ways, these studies address the root problems of the state-centred outlook on society and common life. One example of silencing practices that we can mention is something Robin Clair in her work *Organizing Silence* refers to as *silencing forms of communication* (Clair, 1998: 38–9). Although not discussing refugees per se, Clair's notion is especially interesting for a refugee-focused analysis. Many contemporary communication practices restrict refugees' capacity for verbal communication and some quite directly force them into unchosen silence.

Although silence can be oppressive, it is not always so. Silence is not something in itself negative. It is not always politically forced but can sometimes express political freedom and autonomy. Silence can become the very tactic that is used to resist (see Wagner, 2012) the logic of a prevailing aesthetic speech system. We can speak of autonomous, resistant silences in contrast to oppressive ones (see Keating, 2013). Resistant silences can emerge in acts of political resistance where political activists use their bodies to silently communicate their dissent, as was done in the two refugees' protest on the steps of the Finnish Parliament House.

In her analysis on the performativity of public assembly, Judith Butler offers an interesting discussion on the use of silent bodily gestures in public demonstrations. She argues that the principles of freedom and equality can be actualised through silent concerted action. This kind of action can be an egalitarian, radical democratic mode of action that consists of plural performativity where protestors formulate their claims in corporeal terms through 'bodily gestures of refusal, silence, movement, and refusal to

move' (Butler, 2015: 83, 218). Butler's arguments on the radical democratic potential in silent demonstrations are interesting for our analysis.¹¹ However, because we are here specifically dealing with the two refugees' protest in Finland, our focus is not on large demonstrations or protests by pre-existing movements but on the embodied, silent act of just two people. The two refugees in Finland utilised silent tactics but could not rely on the force of a large crowd of people in performing their protest. As such, their individual bodies were more actively on display in the act.

One thing we must, however, ask is how the refugees' protest should be understood politically as it consisted of an act of *self-harm* and was possibly an attempted suicide. Critical Suicide Studies and Critical Suicidology, for example, have taken a critical view on conventional framings of suicide as something individualised or unpolitical. They instead emphasise the deep political character of suicide by linking it to questions of oppression and exclusion (see Mills, 2018: 305; Marsh, 2010; Button and Marsh, 2019). China Mills, for example, points out how even the naming of some deaths as suicide can be problematic because it can 'normalise "social contexts marked by stigma, exclusion and hate"', preventing us from understanding how indifference and "hate kills"' (Mills, 2018: 305; Reynolds, 2016: 170). Indeed, if the two refugees in Finland had died of their wounds, their deaths would not have appeared simply as individual deaths, but as collectively produced ones. The oppressive reality of the prevailing refugee system, and the aesthetic speech system that left the refugees few alternative paths for political communication, in a way forced the refugees to the act of self-harm. If they had died from their act, their deaths would have resulted from these collectively preserved systems.

The refugees' act of self-harm did not, however, only express the refugees' politically oppressed position but also displayed the power they still possessed for political action. The refugees' purpose was not simply to die, but to convey a political message through their act. They were using self-harm as a protest tactic (see Lahiri, 2015; see also Pfeifer, 2018) and their aim was to bring to view an existing political *wrong* in the aesthetic order (see Rancière, 1999). We can ask, furthermore, what was the meaning of silence here? How does an act of self-harm or the act of killing oneself speak *silently*?

One way of describing the silence that a public act of self-harm or suicide conveys is to say that, through such acts, a person demonstrates that she cannot express her hurt verbally in the aesthetic speech order. When one has a need to speak politically about a felt hurt but does not have access to verbal political speech, she might instead silently communicate the hurt directly on her own body.¹²

A silent act of self-harm can, in an empathy-evoking way, communicate about an experienced harm. Silence brings the visual message of the act to the centre stage. A silent act of self-harm can in an embodied way display the harm one has experienced in the context of an oppressive aesthetic organisation of social and political positions. Through their silent act of self-harm, the two refugees in Finland, in an embodied form attempted to show the harm they had suffered in the statist context. Their act appeared as tactical, silent embodied communication.

A silent political act of self-harm can powerfully convey a message of refusal. When self-harm is enacted as a gesture of political resistance, it can furthermore become kind of a *distancing act*. We can interpret that, through their protest, the two refugees in Finland, on the one hand, distanced themselves from the statist aesthetic sense and

political logic determining what it means to live a liveable life (see Butler, 2009). The refugees refused the Finnish state's interpretation of their capacity to live such a life in Russia. Their act was based on their awareness that they could not live a life worth living there, as they would not be able to express their love and sexuality without fear of persecution. Through their act, they refused to be inserted into a political context where the right to sexuality was not protected in practice.

On the other hand, through their protest, the refugees symbolically distanced themselves from the statist aesthetic order of political speech.¹³ For its silent while, the protest silenced statist political vocabularies on offer and cleared space for imagination beyond statism. It pointed toward an alternative way of imagining politics. The protest can be understood as a creative one, although not in an individualist, 'existentialist-expressionist' (Lütticken, 2014: 90) way. It was a politically created visualisation of refugees' marginalisation and an attempt to offer an alternative aesthetic sensibility on the political position of the refugee. The protest was a way of creatively sharing a political definition of the world and of the refugees' situation in it. As such, it also constituted a mode of political storytelling.

The protest appeared as an instance of tactical, political storytelling and as an attempt at silently *forcing a story* upon others. Tactical storytelling protests, both in their verbal and silent modes, can be interruptive to the circulation of hegemonic 'stories' in prevailing aesthetic, political frameworks. They can succeed in interrupting what L.M. Bogad calls the *hegemonologue*: 'the hegemonic monologue of common neoliberal ideology that drones on from big and little screens' (Bogad, 2016: 32), attempting to appropriate the aesthetic sense systems of politics on a global level. Political storytelling acts can offer glimpses of alternative possible aesthetic systems. Refugees' acts of political storytelling can especially resist prevailing hegemonic sense on the political position of the refugee in statist contexts and introduce an alternative sense of the refugee identity.

One important aspect in political storytelling acts is their inspirational function. Political acts that convey alternative stories and challenge the legitimacy of prevailing aesthetic orders can be inspiring to the people politically marginalised in these orders. Acts of political storytelling can inspire and evoke in others as well the courage to become politically active. Just as there is great comfort in finding someone else telling one's story and feel of the world, there can be consolation in organising collective political action from the basis of that story and feel. This is also why certain kinds of conspiring with others like oneself might be plausible, especially when it is with the carriers of the same social sorrow. Such connection allows the setting of an affirmative position from which to politically speak.

Common politics can be an outlet for anguished feelings and sometimes even a source of joy (see Arendt, 1958). The two refugees in Finland might have found comfort in the fact that neither of them was acting alone. In their common political act, they could together seek emotional relief from their hurt of having been rejected by the state. The refugees' act in a way expressed Nietzschean *ressentiment*. Through their act of self-inflicted violence, the refugees attempted to deaden and drive out of consciousness their pain of abandonment (Stauffer, 2015: 126; see also Minkinen, 2007). Their act was not, however, outwardly aggressive nor was it in a strict sense a passive-aggressive action.

We might rather describe it as a creatively aggressive act. It consisted of silent, visual representation of the refugees' aggressive feelings springing from their unmet expectations and unrealised dreams. The act was a way of publicly displaying their unbearable disappointment in the prevailing aesthetic, political context, as well as an attempt to find relief from it. The protest was an outlet for the refugees' sorrow and anxiety, and an occasion to mourn in public (see Butler, 2009; Honig, 2013). It was a form of artistic sublimation taken performatively to an embodied level.

The refugees' protest appeared as a theatrical, *tactical performance* (Bogad, 2016). If we follow Michael de Certeau's (1984) theorisation of tactics as the 'art of the weak', we can argue that in their protest, the refugees acted as tactical performers in the context of a strategically imposed (Bogad, 2016) aesthetic speech system. The refugees' silent performance appeared as a tactical inscription of discord into what might be described as a harmony of oppression kept intact and verbalised by certain privileged, strategic speakers in the aesthetic system of speech.

The refugees' tactical, silent performance was constituted through political theatrics. Political theatrics can be an important feature of silent acts of political resistance and it can be especially useful in refugee protests. By mimicking the harm they have experienced in the context of a statist aesthetic system, refugees can attempt to involve their audience in directly experiencing the pain of this harm that otherwise might stay hidden from and unrecognised by them. We can argue that in their protest in Finland, the refugees, for example, symbolically mimicked the violence of the refugee system. On the one hand, through their act of causing harm to their rejected refugee bodies they repeated the injury experienced by many refugees without safe routes for reaching places of liveable life. On the other hand, the refugees' act theatrically predicted the harm that they, as representatives of a sexual minority, expected to suffer if they were deported back to Russia. Furthermore, we might argue that the refugees' act also theatrically displayed their *political death*; it showed their 'death' as political subjects in the world of political life (see Arendt, 1951).

The refugees' protest was, however, not *pessimistic activism*,¹⁴ although it did express a somewhat pessimistic attitude as it consisted of a possibly lethal act of self-afflicted bodily harm and so, in a sense, already hung on the edge of losing. First, the protest did not end in death, but was a kind of *play with death*. It performatively politicised refugee deaths and suffering. Second, the protest was not a withdrawal from common matters and a folding into oneself. Rather, it was a political withdrawal from the prevailing aesthetic sense of the common and from the refugees' position in that common.

What made the refugees' performative withdrawal, furthermore, strongly political was the location in which it was enacted. The steps of the Parliament House, as well as being a symbolically political place of state power, were also high above the street level and constituted a kind of stage for the refugees' act. Indeed, the protest was enacted in a place where it could be seen by many people. The political stage the refugees set was then both a place where they made their political marginalisation visible and a place where they autonomously took political control. Through their protest the refugees in a way brought into being the Arendtian *space of appearance* where they could appear as equal political actors (Arendt, 1958).¹⁵ In the protest, by expressing a kind of DIY spirit,

the refugees autonomously occupied a space from statist appropriation and used it for performing an act that represented equality beyond all statism. This performative occupation of a public space could also be described as experimentation with Hakim Bey's freedom expressing *autonomous zones* (Bey, 2003). The refugees turned the statist location into an autonomous space and a stage where they actualised their political agency and enacted their resistance against the state.

The refugees' act did not symbolically dissent only to the state's appropriation of space, but as has been argued throughout the article, essentially to the statist privatisation of verbal political speech. In the context of privatised verbal speech, the refugees instead actualised the power residing in silent political communication. Their '*bodies spoke politically*' (Butler, 2015: 83), even when they had been counted out of legitimate participation in the statist political speech system. The refugees' protest, overall, pointed toward the politically emancipatory potential in silent action for politically marginalised people in contexts of statist aesthetic speech systems.

Enacting aesthetic revolutions

Silent protests, such as the two refugees' protest in Finland, can be described as expressions of a certain kind of political 'spirit'. This spirit can be defined in many ways. It can be named, for example, the spirit of autonomy, the spirit of freedom or the spirit of equality. In *On Revolution* (1963), Hannah Arendt discusses the idea of the *revolutionary spirit*, which is the spirit of actualising something new politically. In Arendtian theory, this spirit appears as the urge and courage for miraculous political action that initiates something new in the world (Arendt, 1958, 1963).

An alternative way of describing the spirit of politics would be to call it a 'revolting spirit'. This definition would perhaps capture something of the Zapatista conception of political refusal as an expression of that something that in us intuitively says *no* to domination (Holloway and Peláez, 1998: 184–5). Expressions of a revolting spirit can be politically meaningful. We must here argue against, for example, Slavoj Žižek, who attacks as a basic weakness of many contemporary political protests the fact that they remain mere expressions of rage and, as such, cannot result in positive programs of socio-political change. The problem, Žižek argues, is that '(t)hey express a spirit of revolt without revolution' (Žižek, 2012: 78). As the spirit of political subversion, however, and of the active representation of autonomous definitions of the world, the revolting spirit can be politically meaningful. This spirit can materialise in acts of resistance that powerfully bring into view the oppressiveness of the prevailing aesthetic political order and point toward the possibility of realising a more egalitarian one. The revolting spirit can thus indeed be just another name for the revolutionary spirit: the spirit of actualising something new politically.

Refugee protests are examples of the emergence of the revolting, revolutionary spirit in contemporary political contexts. Refugee protests expressing this spirit undermine the aesthetic sensibility of prevailing aesthetic refugee regimes. The persistent reoccurrence of protests led by this spirit holds the potential for bringing about continual aesthetic revolutions in the sensibility of law and politics.

Especially silent protests can initiate such aesthetic revolutions. Against the backdrop of what could be described as frameworks of loud representative vocalisation and the noise pollution of statist rhetoric, they emerge as a radical, subversive form of political communication. The refugees' protest in Finland, for example, as a verbally silent, embodied act of political communication, appeared as a potentially subversive act. In the statist context of citizen-centred politics and a representative speech system privileging loud extrovert modes of verbal speech, its silent reaching out had a special *quieting* effect.

Silent protest acts by politically marginalised people can sometimes succeed in making their audience speechless as well. A silent act can cause a pause in the midst of a loud message-filled reality and it can be experienced as something meaningful. In these moments of silence, the logic of prevailing aesthetic orders of politics can be sensed anew. When many such silences take place simultaneously, a broader, common subversion in the aesthetic orders can start to evolve. The silent political act that brought about these many silences can then be understood as an aesthetically revolutionary act.

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Notes

1. In the article, I use the word refugee as a general concept referring to any individual who has left her place of origin and is seeking refuge in another place. By doing so, I attempt to emphasise the refugee-seeking person's own definition of her situation and not succumb to a statist interpretation of the legal refugee status (see, for example, Parekh, 2016).
2. The right to sexuality was also emphasised by those who set out to support the refugees claim in Finland. For example, SETA, a human rights organisation dedicated to advancing LGBTI rights in Finland, stressed the importance of protecting this right and called for a wider recognition of the state of distress of sexual minorities in Russia.
3. The refugee can appear, paradoxically, as if at a threshold between criminality and the uttermost innocence. In Agambenian tone, she then is the human being captured by biopolitical power in a state of exception beyond capacity for political action (see Agamben, 1998). However, see also Rancière's critical remarks on some of Agamben's ideas on this subject (Rancière, 2010c; see also Schaap, 2011).
4. In interpreting the aesthetic, politically subversive effects of the two refugees' protest, I do not focus only on those effects that the refugees were possibly consciously aiming for, but also on those effects that the protest implicitly or symbolically brought about.
5. Extrovert speech here refers to certain loud, often aggressive practices of strategic vocalisation. The problem with this mode of speech is that it can usually only emerge by forcing other potential political speakers into silence.
6. The representative form from the outset excludes from politics people who cannot easily take part in dominant speech practices because of, for example, their life circumstances or their basic sociability.
7. The refugees used vulnerability politically in making their political claim. For analyses on vulnerability in politics see, for example, the edited volume *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Butler et al., 2016).

8. Rancière's theory is very much rooted in the idea adopted from the radical pedagogist Joseph Jacotot of an equality of intelligences (see especially Rancière, 1991).
9. See, for example, Hannah Arendt's (1968) arguments against this conception of power.
10. See this in contrast to Arendtian theory (Arendt, 1958).
11. Silent demonstrations can also be part of the realisation of what Butler calls sensate democracy. This expression points to the variety of modes of human performativity beyond public verbal speech (Butler, 2015: 207; see also Jenkins, 2015).
12. In an act of self-harm, moreover, silence can surround the act and become its essential feature. As we noted earlier, it can give the bodily act its dramatic effect.
13. On the idea of politics taking place at a distance from the state see Alain Badiou's work (Badiou, 2006; but see also Abensour, 2011).
14. On some remarks on pessimism in politics see Michel Foucault (1986) and Todd May (2007: 135).
15. Christina Beltran, for example, argues that the Arendtian spaces of appearance can spring up anywhere and not only between citizens of a nation-state (Beltran, 2009).

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